Is user involvement something we should strive for?
Statistics Iceland's experience

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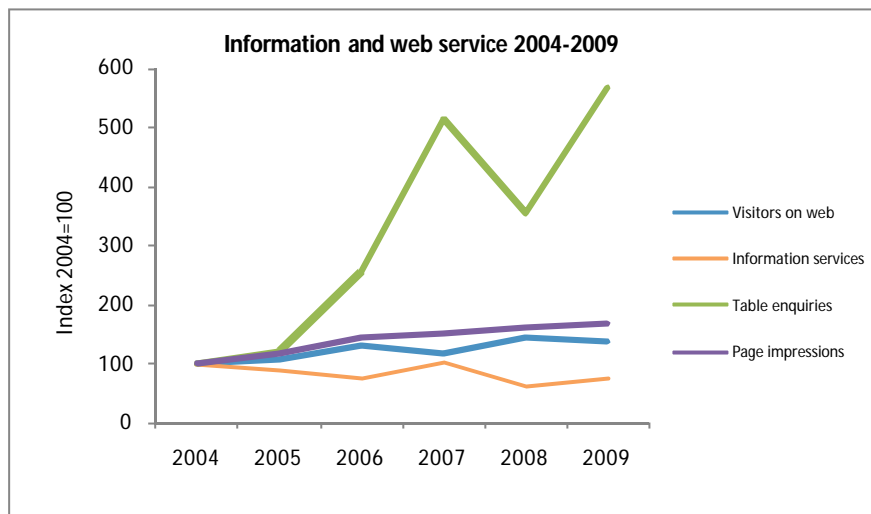Department of IT and dissemination, Statistics Iceland

Abstract
This paper considers the relationship between a statistical organisation and its users with focus on social media. Statistics Iceland has launched a commenting system on its website, allowing the public to write on its pages for the first time. Other forms of user participation will be discussed as well: namely user surveys, meetings with users as well as information services of Statistics Iceland. The different ways of user participation are examined, their impact on the institution and effectuality.

1. User involvement

User involvement has increased considerably during the last decade, both in the media and through new channels such as blogs and social networking, e.g. Facebook, Wikipedia and Twitter. In the digital age, not only professionals within the media have the tools to comment, write about events or distribute photos, but also the general public. We do not have to go far back in the history of the Icelandic media to see the tremendous change in user involvement. In the year 1990 the Icelandic newspaper, *Morgunblaðið*, had one small section where user's comments were published. Users could send in their concerns hoping they would be published, but the newspapers had total control. Today this is not the case. Ordinary citizens have many channels to express themselves and some media, e.g. New York Times, CNN and some Icelandic media allow users to comment or blog on their sites. Citizen journalism, with users informing each other, has evolved and online user generated content filling countless pages. The professional news sites find themselves "increasingly in the position of hosting unpolished, wide-ranging, and unpredictable user-generated discussions" (Braun and Gillespie, 2010). This has resulted in a more blurring line between news organisations and online media platforms.

There are many possible ways of involving users of national statistics, old and new, such as by conducting surveys, interviewing users, holding meetings, observing online user behaviour, and using social networking media to interact with users, e.g. commenting systems, Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Wiki and blogs. The involvement can be interactive or not and it may either be initiated by the user or the statistical organisation. Involving the user can be time consuming, which we have learnt by serving our users in the past e.g. through telephone and e-mail. The question to ask is not whether we should involve them; we have been doing that, but rather whether we should increase our user involvement with new technical media.

Information and web service 2004-2009

Index 2004=100

- Visitors on web
- Information services
- Table enquiries
- Page impressions

How much user participation do we want? Should we embrace all new technology and involve as many users as we can or should we be more selective. User involvement has been much discussed at Statistics Iceland in 2010, using and observing different methods for user involvement:

- User survey and stakeholder meeting
- Information services
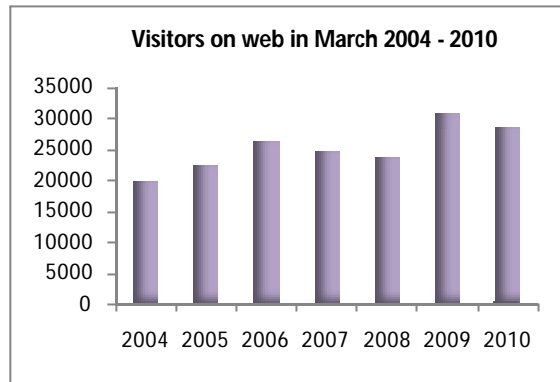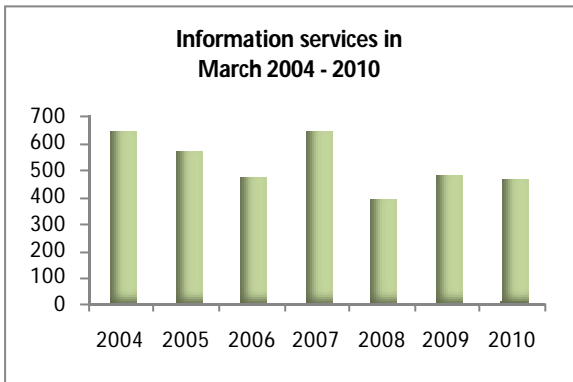- Social media - commenting system, Facebook and Twitter buttons

Statistics Iceland has not defined or categorised its users, e.g. according to profession, education or age and Statistics Iceland's website and publications have not been focused on selected target groups.

2. Meeting with users and user survey
A stakeholders meeting was held at Statistics Iceland 12 May 2010. Around 30 guests attended the meeting where people were able to express their opinion about Statistics Iceland. A number of guests held a speech regarding their main concerns, and although the meeting was meant to focus on Statistics Iceland's policy making, guests were mainly concerned with the way statistics are disseminated. A user survey was conducted in January 2010. Participants in the survey were pre-defined as users of the statistics. The survey was also on the Statistics Iceland website and web users were encouraged to take part.

3. Information service
Statistics Iceland is a small institution compared with the other Nordic statistical institution and the staffs who works in the information services are also responsible for the website, px-tables, news system and publications. Multiple tasks have to be undertaken, which is valuable although frustrating at times. The telephone ringing and e-mails can be a great source of information on how to improve our statistics and dissemination. Several hundred enquiries through e-mail and telephone are answered per month.

Information services in March 2004 - 2010	Visitors on web in March 2004 - 2010

4. Commenting system, Facebook and Twitter buttons

The latest form of user involvement is through what has been coined social media. For the last years involvement through social media has been increasing on the internet, especially on the media news pages. Mayfield (2008) defines social media as a group of new kinds of online media that blurs the line between media and audience, and it is open to feedback, participation and conversation. The Wikipedia definition is:

> Social media are media for social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues. They support the democratization of knowledge and information and transform people from content consumers to content producers. (Wikipedia, 2010)

There are many forms of social media e.g. commenting systems, blogs, social networks and wikis. The IT and dissemination staff at Statistics Iceland have been watching the social media development for a while, observing possibilities and making a decision about whether to take part or not. The goal is to get into more contact with users and to receive more feedback from them as well as making the web pages a little livelier. Social media was one means to that goal. A decision was made, after long discussions on where Statistics Iceland should place itself in the world of social media, to implement a commenting system on our news pages. A few weeks after launching the system a decision was made to give users the option of sending Statistics Iceland news items to Facebook and Twitter.

The main focus in using social media was the user participation. At this stage we were not thinking of social media as a tool to advertise Statistics Iceland but rather to get information from users. A decision was made to not create pages on e.g. Facebook and Twitter for the institution, a decision based on the subjective view that Facebook and Twitter are not places for a statistical institution and that it would be too time consuming to monitor them. On the other hand, placing Facebook and Twitter buttons on the news pages, allowing people do discuss them with friends was the user's decision and no extra work for us. In this project we decided that users would not be followed on other sites and we would not take part in discussions on Statistics Iceland's subjects elsewhere, not intervene in blogs or anything else on other platforms. The same is to say about Wikipedia.

At first we were thinking of placing the system with the web tables, but decided to take one step at a time and start with the news items. The decision to take the step was a little daring

and our feelings may be compared with the attitude of senior news executives in the UK to user involvement (the commenting system). The editors feared the involvement although they felt that this was not something they could ignore (Hermida and Thurman 2007). Before implementing the commenting system on the Statistics Iceland website a press release was published on the internal web. Some members of staff expressed their fear of allowing the public to write directly on the pages. Many were positive about the experiment but others expressed their concerns such as "will all comments be monitored and will the IT and dissemination department answer all comments". Some were afraid that all the "silly people" commenting on the news media websites would fill our pages with useless comments on a subject they had no understanding of. The feeling of having someone entering our domain is somehow scary and perhaps similar to what the news executives in the UK felt when commenting systems were first launched. A commenting system within a news item which is limited to a certain subject and usually only relevant in a set time frame could be a potential tool for researchers and the ordinary citizen to discuss statistics, deepen their understanding of the subject and in a way enforce democracy which must be one of statistics organisation's objectives.

5. Launching the commenting system
The designing process began in February 2010. The comment box is placed on the bottom of the news page, and the comments posted appear under the comment box, the latest comment first. Minimal information from users was required since too many fields of information to fill out might turn them away; a difficult decision since at the same time it would be interested to get some background information from users, like e.g. are they students, journalists or academics. A name and an e-mail address were the only items to fill in, the e-mail required but not the name. On the external web, only the name appears but the e-mail address is hidden. On the intranet, staff can make comments without giving any information.

One member of IT staff designed the commenting system, which took around 30 hours. Along with the commenting system a website was created listing all the comments posted. The page makes monitoring easier and it is possible to delete comments as warned on the external website. The commenting system was first launched on the intranet, in the beginning of March, in order to error proof it and see how it worked. The system was then activated on the external web 24 March. A button was placed on the news pages leading to a text where users were encouraged to comment on the news, share their opinion and point out what could be improved. The Facebook and Twitter buttons were placed on the news pages, above the comment box, 7 April. Users were encouraged to write comments. A warning was placed below the commenting form, saying "please note that Statistics Iceland will remove inappropriate comments".

Answering comments is on the hands of the IT and dissemination department. The website listing all comments in time order is monitored a few times a day and when new comment arrive an e-mail is sent to the respective subject specialist should he or she want to comment on the comment, if not the dissemination department decides if an answer is needed or if the comment should be deleted.

6. Findings

6.1 Meeting with users and user survey

Our main users focused mainly on the web on the stakeholders meeting and we learned that people want more time series, older data on the web, better navigation, same format for data on more public organisations' websites, interactive graphs, shorter or more concise descriptions of content (varedeklarationer), more footnotes in PX-tables, especially on the English website, better access to international data and a direct access to micro data for researchers. According to the user survey around 90% were satisfied with the Statistics Iceland's website. The survey was content oriented and aimed at specifics users but was also placed on the web. The findings are quite positive for Statistics Iceland although people want more timely data and more frequent updating. The meeting and the survey were interesting in a way that users were specific about their needs. Those who took part in the meeting and part of the sample for the survey were Statistics Iceland's main users, users selected by the institution, who are custom to the way we present our statistics, and perhaps not as critical of the navigation etc., since they know their way around the site. The results of the survey and the meeting are thorough and users described in detail where they found us lacking and where they are content. However, conducting a survey and holding meetings can be costly and we are only able to do so occasionally.

6.2 Information services

Enquiries received through telephone and e-mail can be very useful, since they often concern the website, directly or indirectly. Many users contact the information services while searching the site unable to find what they are looking for, want to ask for more specific information or if they want further explanations regarding data on the web. What they say is often discussed by staff but perhaps the reasons why users are lost on our website and why they are not happy with the results they do find could be more actively and systematically analysed. As mentioned above the information service is a part of the IT and dissemination department which gives us an advantage since we do not have to report to another department when something on the web needs to be fixed. The information service is furthermore a continuous process, always initiated by the user.

*6.3 Commenting system*The commenting system has not been used as much as expected. Most comments are requests from people who find the release somehow ambiguous. Such comments are useful and titles to items have been changed accordingly. One comment has been deleted, i.e. deemed inappropriate. Although there are not many comments currently on the SI site the feeling is not that of a "ghost town", as Gerry McGovern (2008) states has happen to numerous government websites attempting to interact with the public, since the commenting system is a tool in our press releases but not a special forum for discussions.

Why people are reluctant to comment on our website is not clear and there are probably several reasons. Firstly, Statistics Iceland is a government institution with little traffic compared with the news media sites. Secondly, a large number of our users go directly to their subject and never look at the news items. Thirdly, people might be uncomfortable writing something on a public institution's website. And last but not least, the "typical" user of statistics is perhaps not the type who makes public comments on websites. Jakob Nielsen divides users into three groups; those who contribute regularly (around 1% of users), those who contribute sometimes (9%), and the 90% who never take part. He claims that for the majority the web is only a tool to receive information (BBC News, 2007). In addition to the

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above, it is possible that users are not reading through all our press releases (the commenting system is on the bottom or each press release) or that they do not find them interesting at all. According to our user survey the average age of Statistics Iceland's users is 45 years. Although age does not define personality researches affirm there is strong relation between online user behaviour and age. Younger people in Iceland have been using computers and interact with others online from a very young age and probably find it more natural than some older people to discuss matters to people somewhere out there, people they have never met and probably will never meet. Should the age issue be one of the reasons the commenting system has not been used much, it means that our users in the future will be more prone to interact and write their thoughts on our website. Although it may well be as Nielsen argues, that young people spend a lot of time online not because they are a new generation but because they are young and that their time spent online will decrease as they grow up: "It's because they are 20 years old that they act differently to 40-year-olds" (BBC News, 2007).

The comments that have been posted are mainly enquires, although perhaps not enquires that people would phone or e-mail about. The nature of the comments made and enquires sent or phoned about is different and people who comment on something would not necessary send a formal request regarding the matter. It is hard to say how much the Facebook and Twitter buttons have been used on the Statistics Iceland site. Facebook use in Iceland is very high, around 190,000 persons, 60% of the total population are registered users, (Facebook, 2010), the use of Twitter is not as common as Facebook (there are around 106 million accounts on Twitter but 466 millions on Facebook worldwide) and 60% of Twitter user are in the USA. After we put the Facebook button on our news site, 57 people came from Facebook.com to our web according to our coordinated web measures, but no one came from twitter.com to Statistics Iceland.

6.4 Comments on news media sites

The majority of Statistics Iceland's press releases are either copied or slightly altered and published on the main news media sites. We looked at comments on two news media sites; one that allow users to comment on their pages and one which shows who has been blogging about the news item. *Eyjan* (www.eyjan.is) is an independent news medium and a web portal which is only on the internet and not related to any other enterprises or any other media form. *Mbl* (www.mbl.is) is a news site owned by *Morgunblaðið*, the oldest daily newspaper in Iceland, which is distributed by subscription and single-copy sale. *Eyjan* allows its users to blog within the news item on the media sites, while *Mbl* has a blog area and provides a link to the comments on bloggers' pages.

The following examples show how people have been commenting on Statistics Iceland news on other sites in the past: On November 25th 2009 Statistics Iceland published a Statistical Series on a Travel Survey 2007-2008. *Eyjan* (2009) wrote a press release on the survey and published the same day. One of the conclusions of the survey is the evident fact that people with more money travelled more often. Five people commented on the press release 25 November and the discussions are mainly about how unfair it is that the majority of Icelanders have to pay at the expense of the few. One person states that he has not travelled abroad since 2006 and one mentioned the minister of finance and describes in a sarcastic manner how the Government could control and affect tourism patterns of Icelanders. The survey is not discussed as such and nothing positive is said about the survey

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or its conclusions. On April 29th 2010 Statistics Iceland released a press release on the consumer price index for April. The news was copied on *Mbl* several minutes after the publishing and three persons blogged about it. All three expressed their view on the unfairness of the indexation of the CPI which is a political decision but not a decision made by Statistics Iceland. The tone is very negative towards the indexation which is the only subject of these bloggers' comments. On May 21st 2010 Statistics Iceland published the news: *Financial status of households 2004-2009.* Nine people blogged about the news which was copied on *Mbl* and according to *Mbl* 32 liked it on Facebook (Mbl.is, 2010). The same is to say about these comments as the above mentioned, i.e. they are not about methodology or the subject as such but rather a discussion on political matters which Statistics Iceland has supposedly evoked with its data.

7. Next steps

It has not been determined whether the commenting system will stay on the external web in the future. We see no solid reason at this stage to remove the commenting system and the Facebook and Twitter buttons, at least not now when so little involvement is the case. The technique is there and by launching the system we have forced ourselves to make up our minds about the usefulness of social media and the attitude towards the new medium within the institution. The use of the commenting system on the internal website is picking up and people are expressing their opinion increasingly regarding professional matters and social events. The decision to not make pages for Statistics Iceland on e.g. Facebook and Twitter is unchanged and we have not discussed the idea of using smart phone applications. Should Statistics Iceland decide to go on a marketing campaign, social media, or whatever the then latest technology will be coined, will most definitely be used. The idea of publishing Statistics Iceland's material through other channels is a decision the future has to hold. A user survey and a stakeholder meeting will not be conducted in the nearest future. A more systematic approach to read the often hidden messages received through telephone and e-mail may be a productive step and will be considered in the autumn.

Conclusion

So is user involvement something we should waste more energy on than we already have in the past? Should a conclusion be drawn by the number of users' comments on the Statistics Iceland website and the nature of the comments found on the news media sites, it might be said that a commenting system would not benefit our organisation as much as we were hoping in the beginning. The time spent monitoring comments and discussions, which do not directly serve the pre-defined purpose of increasing involvement to improve the site and statistics, would seem like wasted resources. But are they? The commenting system is a subject oriented medium which enables interesting discussions between users with or without Statistics Iceland's employees. Discussion threads and comments from different individuals may well enliven our site and deepen other's understanding of the material, supporting as stated in the Wikipedia explanation of social media cited above: "the democratization of knowledge and information and transform people from content consumers to content producers". Or is it so that increased user generated content and news items with a number of unruly comments somehow undermines our credibility? Is the dream, of having ordinary citizens discussing our subject online, utopian and only fit for the ideal democratic society?

Before starting the project we asked ourselves how much user involvement we want with regard to different media and different methods of involvement. The same question can be asked with emphasis on how much rather than how many media, and how we are going to act on increased user involvement. Gerry McGovern (2008) has said that: "The naïve tool-centric view of Web 2.0 still exists. 'Just give them the blog and the wiki software and get out of the way' has very limited logic. But it is classic IT-thinking." We can make countless user surveys and offer all sorts of social media on our website without ever really considering what the audience is saying and how we should consider his/her opinion. And the number of comments we can count; from our commenting system; from people through user surveys; stake holders meeting; or through information services, may only be as high as the number of comments that we do use to improve our website or methodology. It is an arrogant view to close the door on users claiming ivory tower professionalism and the ideal of collective intelligence is not there unless it has some effects. The commenting system is a subject oriented medium which enables interesting discussions between users with or without Statistics Iceland's employees. The new media allows the user to write as much as he wishes, but if there is no one who listens he is expressing himself into a void.

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